Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 9 | Issue 3 Article 3

7-1-1992

Feminist Christian Philosophy

Patricia Altenbernd Johnson

FEMINIST CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY?

Patricia Altenbernd Johnson

The paper argues that in order to develop the autonomy, integrity, and boldness that Plantinga has advised Christian philosophers to develop, we need to listen to the voices of feminist philosophers within and outside of the Christian community. The paper sets out the hermeneutical stance of the Christian philosopher as described by Plantinga and shows how feminist thought contributes to this stance. The paper focuses on how we name and symbolize the sacred, reviews some of the names and symbols used by feminist thought, and makes use of Sara Ruddick's work, *Maternal Thinking*, to explore some of the implications of the name "Mother."

"There are words I cannot choose again,"
Natural Resources, 13
Adrienne Rich

Seven years ago Alvin Plantinga offered some "Advice to Christian Philosophers." He suggested that, within the philosophical community in which we, as Christians, find ourselves, we need to display more autonomy, more integrity, and more boldness. My aim is to offer some further, but related, advice. Christian philosophers would do well to heed the voices of feminist philosophers both within and outside of the Christian community. If our philosophy is an "expression of deep and fundamental perspectives, ways of viewing ourselves and the world and God" (Plantinga, p. 271), then we must constantly examine those perspectives in order better to articulate them and to understand how those perspectives relate to our thought and our action. In this paper, I will set out the hermeneutical structure of the task that Plantinga recommends for Christian philosophers and show how the voices of feminism contribute to this task. While not all Christian philosophers are compelled by this labor of uncovering and critiquing basic presuppositions, I think that more of us should be. As I hope this paper shows, such activity raises important and often difficult questions. To allow these questions to remain undiscussed is to risk our own integrity.

I. *The Hermeneutical Stance of the Christian Philosopher*

Plantinga's advice helps us understand our stance as Christian philosophers in relation to the wider philosophical community. He tells us the story of a

young woman (Christian in her religious commitments) who goes to college and discovers that "philosophy is the subject for her" (p. 254). As an undergraduate she learns how philosophy is currently practiced. She goes to graduate school and learns even more fully the standards and assumptions that guide contemporary philosophical thought. She learns these parameters well. She respects her mentors, and she is inclined to think that departure from these parameters is "at best marginally respectable" (p. 255). Plantinga suggests that as time goes on this young philosopher—now a professional—may "note certain tensions between her Christian belief and her way of practicing philosophy" (p. 256). She may become so concerned about these tensions that she tries to put the two together, "to harmonize them" (p. 256). Plantinga's advice to her is that she is misdirected in doing this. What she should do instead is allow her sense of tension to help her critique the presuppositions of current philosophy. Moveover, she should listen to her own voice and be emboldened to set aside the philosophical parameters of her mentors, to reject their presuppositions and begin from within her own context. She must recognize that all philosophy is engaged, is committed to a definite presuppositional stance, and she must have the Christian courage to follow through on her own engagement.

I find this story compelling for a number of reasons. It describes the hermeneutical process of my own philosophical development in a simple and direct manner. It speaks to me as a religious person who loves philosophy and who is schooled within contemporary philosophical parameters. Moreover, it recognizes the philosophical voice of women.

The hermeneutical process depicted by this story is one that can be called a "hermeneutic of transformation" (Johnson and Kalven, p. 165). The process is hermeneutical in the sense used by Segundo and Fiorenza. It is a process that uncovers and critiques the presuppositons of our fundamental interpretive stances. It then provides us with a transformed framework for further interpreting our basic experiences and texts. This hermeneutical process involves four steps or stages. (1) Contemporary philosophical hermeneutics has shown us that all understanding is engaged and has a presuppositional structure (Heidegger).[1] Entering into any specific discipline or role requires that we take on certain presuppositions, that we become engaged in certain ways.

Usually we do not reflect on those presuppositions. We learn them as part of standing within a particular role or discipline. We do this from at least the time that we begin to learn language. We learn to speak and conceptualize within a particular language long before we ever reflect on the implications of the structure of that language. Indeed, a person can speak a language for all of her or his life and never reflect on the structure of the language.

(2) Sometimes, as was the case with the young philosopher in Plantinga's account, something from our experience leads us to sense a tension between

the commitments in one area of our life and those in another area. Our commitments in one area, for example in our religious life, make us suspicious of our commitments in another area, for example in our philosophical activity. Often it is the experience of exclusion or of trivialization of something that our experience tells us is important that leads us to our suspicions (Segundo). This has certainly been the case for the Christian in contemporary philosophy. The experience of the importance of spiritual life or religious community has led us to be suspicious of any philosophy that excludes these.

(3) The first response to our suspicions is usually to try to harmonize the commitments that we experience in tension. Our understanding changes and we ask for changes in the discipline or role, but we try not to abandon the presuppositions, the engagements, of the areas that are in tension. This was the young philosopher's approach. In his discussion of "Theism and Verifiability," Plantinga suggests that this was also the first impulse of Christians in contemporary philosophy. We accepted the verifiability criterion and tried to harmonize Christian claims with that criterion.

(4) While in some cases it may be possible to retain two sets of presuppositions, harmonizing them to eliminate the tensions, in many cases the suspicion raised leads us to reject certain presuppositions and so to transform a discipline or role. Plantinga advises us to listen to our experience as Christians and to be bold enough to philosophize out of that experience rather than to try to accommodate our thought to the parameters of others. Indeed, he advises us that we need not be concerned with trying to convince these others of the legitimacy or importance of our presuppositional structure.[2] We are to do philosophy as Christians. We might say that he suggests that transformation takes place through action, through witness. And perhaps the Society of Christian Philosophers is an example of the occurrence of a degree of transformation within contemporary philosophy. The tensions between some philosophical approaches and Christianity have not been harmonized, but the existence and membership of the SCP would seem to suggest that our presuppositions are recognized as legitimate even within the wider philosophical community

If we recognize this hermeneutical process as one that we have gone through in our experience as Christians and as philosophers, then we must also recognize the importance of examining the presuppositional structure of our present philosophical engagement. We must listen to the voices of those who, while sharing our Christian commitments, raise suspicions about the nature of our presuppositional structure. It is the voices of women I would urge us to hear today: women who stand commitedly within the Christian community and within the philosophical community, women who raise suspicions out of the experience of lack of agency (exclusion) and silencing (trivialization), and women who speak out of their own experiences of what it means to be bold.

Their suspicion is that patriarchy is deeply embedded in the presuppositional structure of Christianity and so also of any philosophy that accepts unquestioningly this presuppositional structure. Their task, if they are to take Plantinga seriously, is to do Christian philosophy while rejecting patriarchy—to do feminist Christian philosophy. Those who make this attempt are cautioned as to its impossibility by two groups, both claiming that Christianity cannot abandon the presupposition of patriarchy. One group shares the experience of being a woman in a Christian society. They say: Abandon the Christian community. As long as you stay within it you are subject to tyranny and will succumb to patriarchy. This is like the advice that most of us have probably received that we should abandon philosophy so as not to destroy our faith. Others, who share the commitment to Christianity, say that God has ordained patriarchal presuppositions. To be Christian requires the acceptance of those presuppositions. This is not unlike the advice to leave our faith behind when we do philosophy. I would like to repeat Plantinga's advice and suggest that we have integrity and be bold. Let us do feminist Christian philosophy.

I want to suggest some of what this may mean for how we, as Christians, are to view ourselves, name and symbolize the sacred, and conceptualize the work of God in the world.

II. *Visibility, Voice, and the Discipleship of Equals*

We are aware of gendered language and the way that such language has served to render women invisible. Since experience is so important to the hermeneutic process that I am following, it is still important to remind us of that experience. I grew up speaking the language "properly" using "man" and "he" as generic words. Like most women in our society, I became quite competent at hermeneutics, the art of interpretation, before I had any idea as to what the art was. I learned when these words meant male only and when they included me, and I became quite skilled in these interpretive moves. Like the young philosopher, I was so involved in the joy of what I was learning that I did not experience tensions. An awareness of those tensions came upon me slowly. But I still remember the day that I really understood how this language rendered women invisible. I was with colleagues (all male—and all reasonable people) and we were discussing our curriculum in relation to students' future needs. The pronouns were all male, and the word "guy" occurred frequently. As I listened to my colleagues, it hit me that even though half of their students were women, they really saw only the men. Their language revealed women as invisible.

Women also experience themselves as silenced. In the history of the Christian church, women have been told that their role is to be silent, at least about issues of any theological or social importance. If they do have something to say, it is better to have it spoken by a man. The male voice lends authority.

While we may dismiss these ideas as part of the distant past, the experience of women today is often one of being silenced. Recent studies still indicate that women are often not heard. When an idea, already voiced by a woman, is put forward by a male voice, it becomes viewed as significant (Frank, Ashen).

Other studies confirm this experience (Vetterling-Braggin; Baron). They show that children learn parameters from the language of their culture. Girls quickly come to exclude certain possibilities from their futures when the words and images they have for these possibilities are male. The recent study *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al.) shows the frequency with which women experience themselves as silent beings.[3] I urge you to read these studies if you have not. But I am reminded by Simone de Beauvoir that,

> It is . . . a difficult matter for man to realize the extreme importance of social discrimination which seems outwardly insignificant but which produces in woman moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to spring from her original nature (p. xxvi).

And so I would urge you to listen to the voices of women who reflect on their experience of invisibility and silence and who develop in their Christian faith a critique of patriarchy that challenges us to rethink our anthropology. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is one of these voices.

Fiorenza recognizes that women experience invisibility and silence within Christianity, but she also maintains that women find positive experiences within biblical religion; there is a source of strength and boldness. In *In Memory of Her, a Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, she explains the goals of her work as the

> attempt to reconstruct early Christian history as women's history in order not only to restore women's stories to early Christian history but also to reclaim this history as the history of women and men. I do this not only as a feminist historian but also as a feminist theologian. The Bible is not just a historical collection but also Holy Scripture, gospel, for Christians today. As such it informs not only theology but also the commitment of many women today. Yet as long as the stories and histories of women in the beginnings of early Christianity are not theologically conceptualized as an integral part of the proclamation of the gospel, biblical texts and traditions formulated and codified by men will remain oppressive to women (pp. xiv-xv).

In order to do the reconceptualization necessary to address this oppression, she sets out a feminist critical hermeneutics that stresses the importance of identifying, acknowledging, and taking responsibility for our theoretical presuppositions. This activity is particularly important as we reflect on the Jesus tradition and scriptures. While her work is primarily theological, it is important to our work as philosophers because it examines and critiques the biblical and theological presuppositions that often go unexamined in our work.

Fiorenza argues that the theological reading that uses generic language allows women to identify with "general (male) categories and groups" such as "the poor, the lonely, the brothers." However, it does not allow women to identify themselves as in solidarity with other women. Generic (male) language serves not only to keep women as women invisible, but also conceals the message of liberation from patriarchal structures that is at the center of Jesus' message (pp. 142-143). She argues that Jesus' vision for the destitute did not separate economic exploitation and patriarchal oppression. In support of her position she presents three sets of texts from the pre-Gospel Jesus tradition:

> (1) the pre-Markian controversy stories in which Jesus challenges patriarchal marriage structures (Mark 10:2-9 and 12:18-27); (2) the texts on the a-familial ethos of the Jesus movement; and (3) the saying about domination-free relationships in the community of disciples (p. 143).

All of these are worth our careful consideration, but it is the last two sets of texts that are most helpful to my reflections on women's voice and visibility.

One presupposition that many readings of the Jesus movement perpetuate is that women were excluded from the new community that Jesus formed. The image of the disciples is of a band of itinerant men who had left family (including wives) and home behind them to live a radical ethos (p. 145) that those left at home did not live. This radical ethos is identified especially by the abandonment of traditional family relations. Fiorenza notes that Mark and Matthew mention "house, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, children, lands" as left behind. Only in the redactional work of Luke is the wife among those left behind. This suggests that women were not excluded from the new community. She joins this insight with a review of the texts that announce Jesus bringing "sword" to set many people against each other. She observes that nothing is said about setting wife against husband or husband against wife. (Matt 10:34-36, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace , but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household," and Luke 12:51-53, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division; for henceforth, in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.") Fiorenza concludes that it is clear that Jesus did not respect patriarchal family bonds. Moreover, it would be a misreading "to claim that such a radial a-familial ethos is asked only of the male wandering charismatics" (p. 146) and not also of female disciples.

Fiorenza takes a further step in the interpretation that Jesus advocated a community of equal discipleship by looking at those texts where Jesus dis-

cusses the constitution of his true family. These texts mention brothers, sisters, and mothers, but no fathers. She examines texts from Mark:

> Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life" (Mark 10:29-30).
>
> And his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting about him; and they said to him, "Your mother and brothers are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking around those who sat about him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mark 3:31-35).

She concludes: "The discipleship community abolishes the claims of the patriarchal family and constitutes a new familial community, one that does not include fathers in its circle" (p. 147).

Certainly this does not mean that men who participated in the procreation of children were not part of the community. But that the word "father" is not used is significant. In order to understand the implication of refraining from using the word "father," Fiorenza looks at those texts that describe the new family as one of equal discipleship (Mark 10:42-45 and 9:33-37; Matt. 20:26-27 and Luke 22:24-27; Mark 9:35-37, Matt. 18:1-4, Luke 9:48). Matt. 23:8-11 is especially significant for it is here that Jesus advocates calling "no man your father on earth." She comes to the conclusion that the discipleship of Jesus rejects the label and role of father for any human person because "it [the community of disciples] is sustained by the gracious goodness of God whom the disciples and Jesus call 'father'" (p. 150). The term "father" is not to be used to justify patriarchal relationships in the community. Reserving the term for God is intended "precisely to reject all such claims, powers, and structures" (p. 150). "Thus liberation from patriarchal structures is not only explicitly articulated by Jesus but is in fact at the heart of proclamation" (p. 151).

From her work Fiorenza proposes to draw strength for women in overcoming sexism and prejudice, especially that encountered within religion. But there are equally important implications to be drawn for Christian philosophy. If we acknowledge our roots in biblical tradition as important presuppositons to our work, then we must also acknowledge as part of our anthropological and political commitments the community of equality and the overcoming of patriarchy. More particularly, we must be committed to the visibility of women as women and be bold enough to follow out the implications of that commitment. If the name "Father" was to be reserved for God, but has been usurped by men within the family and within the church to perpetuate patriarchal structure, then how do we name God?

III. *Naming the Sacred*

In his insightful and formative work on symbols, Paul Tillich shows why we must be wary of identifying our symbols of the sacred, the ultimate, with the fullness of such a reality (pp. 41-54). Symbols point beyond themselves to the reality that they symbolize. But they also participate in that reality. It becomes easy for us to mistake that participation for the fullness of the reality. Our symbol may limit that which is symbolized and may even lead us to understand that which is symbolized in a fundamentally incorrect manner. This incorrect understanding can have destructive consequences for the religious community.

In a patriarchal society, it is very easy to slip into such problems when we use the word "Father" as a primary symbol for the sacred. While some fathers in our society take on work that has traditionally been the task of mothers, it is still the case that the title "Father" is used only of men and connotes patriarchal authority. Our concept of Father may include love, but it also includes a sense of distance and ultimate control. If we call the sacred "Father," then our image of the sacred includes these characteristics. If we limit the symbols we use of the sacred to the point that this is one of the few allowable symbols and we combine that symbol with those of Lord and Master, we define the sacred in a very limited and potentially destructive manner. The symbol serves to limit the possibility of other aspects of the sacred being present to us.

Religious feminists have addressed this problem by suggesting that we need a wide range of names for the sacred. Many do not totally reject "Father" as a way of naming the sacred, but suggest that also making use of other names will better enable us to experience the fullness of the sacred. Rosemary Ruether suggests that using the name "God/ess" would help us overcome the dualism of nature and spirit. She explains,

> The God/ess who is the foundation (at one and the same time) of our being and our new being embraces both the roots of the material substratum of our existence (matter) and also the endlessly new creative potential (spirit). The God/ess who is the foundation of our being-new being does not lead us back to a stifled, dependent self or uproot us in a spirit-trip outside the earth. Rather it leads us to the converted center, the harmonization of self and body, self and other, self and world. It is the *Shalom* of our being (p. 71).

Elizabeth Dodson Gray, who is also concerned that our images of the sacred should help us reaffirm our role in what she calls an ecological web, suggests that we image God as the power of transformation, or as "the pulse that keeps everything not only in place, but also resonating, moving, and continually transformed and new" (Johnson and Kalven, p. 55).

Letty Russell, in *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective—A Theology*, reminds us that we need not go outside of the Christian biblical and ecclesi-

astical traditions to find other names for God (pp. 98-103). She points to the image of God as servant in Genesis, Exodus, Isaiah, Mark, and Philippians. God is described as analogous to a female bird protecting her young (Ps. 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 91:1,4; Isa. 31:5). And finally, she reminds us that there is biblical precedent for naming God "mother" and "wife" (Ps. 51; Deut. 32:18; Isa.46:3; 51:1; 49:14-15; Ps. 131:2).

Naming the sacred "mother" not only has Biblical basis, it also has a certain history of use. For example, there is Mary Baker Eddy's inclusive term, "Mother-Father God" (Ruether, p. 69) with which many people have grown up.[4] The name "mother" seems particularly important for helping in overcoming the continued power of patriarchal structures in Christian society.

The work of Sallie McFague outlines some of the implications of addressing the sacred as "mother." McFague tends to use the words "maternal" and "parental" interchangeably, and emphasizes that the work of parenting is done by women and men. She does suggest that one of the important effects of using mother as a model or symbol for God is that it requires Christians to focus on the acts of conception, gestation, and birth. While Christians have traditionally been comfortable with the notion of "second birth," they have tended to shy away from birth imagery for creation. She says,

> it is the imagery of gestation, giving birth, and lactation that creates an imaginative picture of creation as profoundly dependent on and cared for by divine life. There is no other imagery available to us that has this power for expressing the interdependence and interrelatedness of all life with its grounds (p. 146).

If the image of mother were used more openly in the tradition, a fuller understanding of God's relation to the world might emerge. This could facilitate the experience of god as intimate and caring. (For an example of the change that this symbol can bring about, try singing "He's God the Whole World in His Hands" changing the symbol from father to mother, "She's Got the Whole World in Her Hands.")

McFague also suggests that this model for God's agapic love is one that focuses on the importance of nurturing and fulfillment. Mother-God cares "about the most basic needs of life in its struggle to continue" (p. 147). Moreover, "God as mother is parent to *all* species and wishes all to flourish" (p. 148).

Certainly, as Tillich has cautioned, every symbol for the sacred has its limitations. The limitations of the image of father have clearly been to reinforce patriarchy and thus to alienate at least some humans from the divine. The symbol of mother will also have its limitations. But anticipation of these limitations should not prevent us from incorporating the power of this symbol into our Christian imagery.

IV. *Maternal Work, Maternal Thinking, and Mother-God*

In the context of this paper, I can neither set out nor develop all of the implications of incorporating the image of Mother-God into Christian symbolism and thus into the presuppositions of Christian philosophy arising out of the image of Mother-God. Since most of those working in Christian philosophy are men, many of whom identify with the name "father," I wish to stress that these suggestions are not intended to set mother against father. They are intended to lead to further reflection on the implications of including the image of mother.

There are many feminist philosophers who are reflecting on the epistemological and ethical implications of the work of mothering (see Trebilcot). These reflections come from a wide range of feminist perspectives. Sara Ruddick's recent book, *Maternal Thinking*, is not particularly aimed at the Christian community and does not discuss the issue of God language. I will, however, present aspects of her work showing how these contribute to the discussion of what it means to speak of Mother-God.

Ruddick begins her analysis from the perspective that she terms "practicalism." She explains,

> From the practicalist view, thinking arises from and is tested against practices. Practices are collective human activities distinguished by the aims that identify them and by the consequent demands made on practitioners committed to those aims (pp. 13-14).

It is from within the context of our practice that we raise questions, judge these questions to be sensible, determine criteria of truth and falsity, and determine what will count as evidence. In other words, practice and thinking are radically interconnected. Her contention is that the maternal practice gives rise to maternal thinking. She acknowledges that mothers as individuals are diverse and shaped by many practices. She focuses on the demands that all mothers must face and the disciplined reflection that arises out of the attempts to meet those demands. She, like McFague, does not restrict the activity of mothering to women. Men also perform maternal labor. She does think that mothering is far more often the work of women than of men that we should be careful not to gloss over the labor of carrying and giving birth which only women do. In order not to conceal women's role she emphasizes the importance of retaining the word "maternal" rather than using "parental."

I find her work helpful to the task of thinking about the image of Mother-God. If God is our mother, then we are imaging Mother-God as carrying out certain practices and as thinking in ways similar to humans who carry out these practices.

She suggests that maternal practice is founded on giving birth, for "To give

birth is to create a new life" (p. 49). But as important as this practice is, once there is new creation all mothers are in a sense adoptive. "Mothering is a sustained response to the promise embedded in that creation" (49). Ruddick identifies three demands that all mothers face that are correlated with three sorts of maternal practice. The demands are for preservation, growth, and social acceptability. The work required is that of preservative love, nuturance, and training (p. 17). Ruddick does not idealize the role of mother in her analysis. She uses stories that emphasize that the practice of mothering is a struggle, sometimes even a struggle against our own violence.[5] Yet, she believes that out of this practice and struggle certain cognitive capacities can and do arise. Reflecting on these helps us better to understand what it means to be a mother.

The first demand, that for preservation, requires the mother to develop "cognitive capacities and virtues of protective control" (p. 71). One capacity that mothers often develop is what Ruddick calls the scrutinizing gaze. Children must be watched, but not watched too closely. It is not that mothers relinquish control. They come to think about it differently. Often because of desire to resort either to domination or passivity, mothers can come to recognize the patience required in order to exhibit appropriate control. If children are to survive they must be protected, and yet they must learn to deal with their world, both social and natural. The practice of mothering tends to lead to the development of an ability to identify danger and to deal with it, not always by eliminating that danger, but by helping the child to deal with the danger. Sometimes that means helping the child to die.

Christian philosophers may be able to use this notion of the scrutinizing gaze of Mother-God in reflections on theodicy. If the preservative love of Mother-God is of this sort, then we should not be expected to be protected from all evil. On the other hand, we should expect a hopeful and supportive presence to help us face and cope with our lives. If God's power is not so much that of total control as of helping us deal with the real dangers of our existence, then the concern of theodicy may be to show how a caring Mother-God helps us to confront and cope with the real dangers and griefs of our lives. The expectation is not that Mother-God will prevent all eveil. Rather, the power of Mother-God is to help us preserve ourselves so that we may grow and flourish. I am not suggesting that this image will solve the problems of reconciling a good God with the existence of evil. Like human mothers, Mother-God may be experienced as destructive rather than preservative. That the image contributes to the complexity of the issue should not count against its significance.

The second demand that Ruddick identifies is for growth. This demand results in the development of ways of thinking that help the mother and child grow and change. Ruddick identifies storytelling as one of these cognitive practices (p. 101). She says

> I believe that many mothers more or less consciously recognize the importance of good maternal narratives and identify realism, compassion, and delight as among their stories' virtues. (p. 101).

To tell a child a story is to help that child incorporate change into an ongoing unity. It is to help the child and the mother to share a history.

Thinking of Mother-God as storyteller seems very compatible with the image of God as presented in Christian scriptures and traditions. The stories presented there tell of a *Heilsgeschichte*, a history of the presence and activity of the divine in and with human history. The notion of Mother-God can augment this tradition. The contribution of this aspect of maternal work to Christian philosophy may be to direct us to focus more on narrative and the use of narrative in legitimating philosophical as well as religious presuppositions.

The third demand, that for social acceptance, requires the work of training. Ruddick describes training as a work of conscience. The work of training is to help "a child to be the kind of person whom others can accept and whom the mothers themselves can actively appreciate" (p. 104). Again, mothers must struggle against the tendency to dominate. There are many pressures placed on mothers, many of whom are quite young, to have well-behaved children. I remember well the pressure on me to toilet train my son. One person claimed that all of her children were trained by nine months—so mine should be too. A mother is pushed to examine her own conscience as she tries to give guidance to her children. Perhaps the child could be trained at nine months, but what sort of power would that require and what sort of relation would it establish? The work of training requires the mother to trust herself and to be sensitive to the spirit of her child. Ruddick suggests that when this practice is developed at its best, mother becomes more trustworthy so that the child can be trustworthy. Moreover, the child comes to recognize that when trust breaks down, as it inevitably does, it is proper to protest.

If Mother-God is our trainer, our guide in coming to conscience, then she is one who is our help in the ongoing struggle to develop our human goodness and trust. We look to her not as a source of all answers or as a dominating rule to be obeyed. She is a help, a guide, a refuge. She recognizes that the work of conscience is a struggle, ongoing and often difficult. For Christian philosophy, this image might contribute to discussions of a soul-making theodicy. For example, this image of God supports John Hick's claim that it would be contradictory to conceive of a God as creating human beings such "that they could be guaranteed freely to respond" to God " in authentic faith and love and worship" (p. 311).

The image of Mother-God as part of the ongoing development of conscience may also contribute to process theology. Reflecting on how human parents change when they both trust and are trusted by their children could

contribute to the process claim that God is , at least in one respect changing. Such reflection could also provide a way of understanding God as both changing and unchanging. The mothering person may be very trustworthy to begin with, but in concretely exhibiting that characteristic, by being self-reflective about trustworthiness, and by being trusted by a child, may be said to be more trustworthy. So also, Mother-God might be said to be trustworthy and yet to become more trustworthy in the process of divine-human relationships. Indeed, the image of Mother-God may be better received by process theology than by other forms of Christian theology because process thought is already inclined to be open to changing images of God as well as to a changing God.

V. *Conclusion*

There is much more work going on in feminist religious and philosophical thought. Most of it remains to be incorporated into the work of Christian philosophy. What I have touched on in this paper only gives some suggestions for a beginning. In Alvin Plantinga's advice, with which I began, he warned us to be "wary about assimilating or accepting presently popular philosophical ideas and procedures" (p. 271). Some of you may be wary of developing feminist Christian philosophy, thinking that you are assimilating that which comes from outside the tradition. I have chosen to look primarily at thinkers who show us the basis of feminist work from within the Christian tradition.

Reflecting on their work leads me to conclude that the autonomy, integrity, and boldness that Plantinga called for is advanced by the work of feminists. In particular, the integration of the name "Mother" for the sacred may help us relate to God in ways that enable us to develop these very virtues and thereby strengthen Christian philosophy.[6]

University of Dayton

NOTES

1. Martin Heidegger describes this presuppositional structure as a fore-having (Vorhabe), a fore-sight (Vorsicht), and a fore-conception (Vorbegriff), (p. 191). Hans-Georg Gadamer adds that it is also a pre-judgment or prejudice (Vorürteil) (p. 245).

2. Plantinga's advice at this point is really not transformative. He seems rather to advocate a type of separatism. Christians will do their philosophy apart from the rest of the philosophical community. This position is much like that of some radical feminists who argue that women can never overcome the prejudices of contemporary society while remaining within that society. So, we form our own society!

3. This study examines the development of voice and self by looking at an all-woman sample. The authors identify five ways of knowing: silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and connected knowledge. While only 2 or 3 of

their 135 subjects were identified as silent, others reported this way in retrospect. Of this silent group, they write: "Words were perceived as weapons. Words were used to separate and diminish people, not to connect and empower them" (p. 24).

4. Sallie McFague reports Herbert Richardson's story of saying his nightly prayer: "Father-Mother God, loving me, guard me while I sleep, guide my little feet up to thee" (p. 137).

5. Sara Ruddick tells the story of a young mother who had an infant that cried through the nights. One night she shut herself from the child's room until she was composed enough to take the child out into the night. They rode the bus all night, protected by the presence of strangers. Feeling great guilt, the mother confided her tendency to violence to another who replied that what was important was what the young mother had done. She had done what was necessary to protect the child from herself (pp. 66-67).

6. This paper was originally presented as The Kathleen and Walter Mullady Memorial Lecture at the Eastern Regional Meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers, Barry University, April 6, 1990.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baron, Dennis. *Grammar and Gender*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.

Belenky, Mary Field, Blyth McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattick Tarule. *Women's Ways of Knowing: the Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*. New York: Basic Books, 1986.

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972.

Fiorenza, Elizabeth Schüssler. *In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad, 1989.

Frank, Francine and Frank Anshen. *Language and the Sexes*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1975.

Gray, Elizabeth Dodson. *Green Paradise Lost*. Wellesley, Massachusetts: Roundtable, 1981.

Gray, Elizabeth Dodson. Patriarchy as a Conceptual Trap. Wellesley, Massachusetts: Roundtable, 1982.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. New York: Harper and Row, 1962.

Heyward, Isabel Carter. *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1982.

Hick, John. *Evil and the God of Love*. London: Collins, 1970.

Johnson, Patricia Altenbernd, and Janet Kalven, eds. *With Both Eyes Open: Seeing Beyond Gender*. New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1988.

McFague, Sallie. "God as Mother," in *Weaving the Visions*, eds. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989.

Plantinga, Alvin. "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy*, volume 1, number 3 (1984), pp. 253-271.

Rich, Adriene. *The Dream of a Common Language*. New York: W.W. Nortin, 1978.

Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. Boston: Beacon, 1989.

Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Sexism and God-Talk*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1983.

Russell, Letty M. *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective—A Theology*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974.

Segundo, Juan. *The Liberation of Theology*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1976.

Tillich, Paul. *Dynamics of Faith*. New York: Harper and Row, 1957.

Trebilcot, Joyce. *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983.

Vetterling-Braggin, Mary. *Sexist Language*. New York: Littlefield, Adams, 1981.